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ABSTRACT

Case study research of adult lifelong readers' key experiences reveals that some of the crucial events resulting in love of reading took place prior to formal literature instruction. Results of interviews with about 60 adult readers of all ages--some of whom choose to read fiction, some of whom do not--indicate reasons readers give for their reading habits and identify commonalities among these readers. Many mentioned that beginning reading and liking to read occurred first in the family, and that oral reading experiences in school were not particularly conductive to reading enjoyment. Three categories of home influence were postulated: strong positive, weak positive, and negative. It appears that when the family has a strong positive influence for developing literacy, the school has relatively little effect on the students' reading attitudes. When the home has a negative impact on the student, either permanently or temporarily, the school probably has the greatest opportunity to influence attitudes. The home influence pattern suggests strategies to strengthen positive goals. Families with a strong positive influence on reading tend to appreciate and support booklists, rating systems, and thoughtful suggestions. Such strategies can become more expansive and directive for those students from homes with a weak positive reading influence. Finally, strategies for students from homes with negative influence provide support rather than opposition--books, a place to read them, and an adult modeling reading behavior. (Specific strategies to help students from each of these home environments are included.) (HTH)

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FINDING THE ROAD TO LIFELONG READING

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FINDING THE ROAD TO LIFELONG READING

Reading teachers have a variety of purposes for their students as they plan for the daily routine. Being people who enjoy and continue to read fiction themselves, these teachers look for ways to influence students to read for pleasure and profit those pieces that may nurture and interest them. However, not all students become habitual readers. Not all students discover the joy of being lost in a book, the challenge of broadening their own perspective, the fascination of seeing a part of themselves inside the covers .

Teachers of English make an assumption that the teaching of literary appreciation will predispose students to become life-long readers of literature. Libraries, book stores, and book clubs give evidence that there are indeed adults who do continue to read fiction by choice. But somewhere there lurks a suspicious question. Does what secondary reading and literature teachers do, in fact, have this impact on adult attitudes toward reading? Case study research of adult lifelong readers' key experiences reveals that some of the crucial events may have taken place far earlier.

Specific memories will be used to set the scene as perceived by these individuals. The types of influences will be analyzed and put into a three part context for the readers's consideration. Using the strengths the lifelong readers perceived in their own backgound and avoiding the pitfalls both they and the anti-readers warn about, suggestions will be presented that might assist the early adolescent onto the Road to Lifelong Reading.

The Reader and the Family

In interviews across the country, the authors have conducted a study of adults who choose to read fiction and some who do not. Through open and lengthy interviews it was possible to record some of the reasons readers give for their lifelong reading habits. The major study looks at the responses of about sixty adult readers of all ages, in widely ranging areas of work, and identifies some commonalities among these readers. In a semi-structured interview of thirty to sixty minutes, the readers recall their earliest reading

experiences at home and at school. They discuss memories of later school reading assignments and the related activities. As they describe reason after reason for reading fiction today, they compare this to what they perceive their teachers' purposes for them to have been. And, they make suggestions for the teaching of literature and building of lifelong reading habits.

Family Memories

It was found that many adults mention the beginnings of reading and liking to read happening first in the family. It seems that parents who read produce families that enjoy reading. Many of those interviewed noted that their partents were readers themselves so even as little children they mimiced adults by picking up books and pretending to read because that was what the adults were doing. Many adults seem to feel that their first interest in reading was sparked by someone reading to them at home. Sometimes it was Gramma or Aunt Jane who read Bible stories, sometimes Mother with Grimms Fairy Tales, often it was siblings that they remember reading aloud to them. The most mentioned books include Charlotte's Web, Lad a Dog, Peter Rabbit, Winnie the Pooh and Ping The Duck. The families that these adult readers describe are usually warm and loving and more important they are families that tend to share experiences. When they work, they all work together. When they play, everyone plays. And when they read or write , everybody picks up a book or pencil and paper.

Some of these readers note that there were not so many distractions such as televsion or alternatives such as sports for girls when they were growing up. Others mention being only children or living in the country where there were no other children around. Those in the older age brackets observe other societal changes since their childhood days such as air conditionsing: one woman recalls that she and her cousins would wear as little clothing as possible and find the coolest spot in the house or yard and sit and read each summer afternoon.

Many of the readers laugh at their memories of their parents letting them get out of doing their chores if they were busy reading. This symptom of the

chronic-reader syndrome was often accompanied by the other common practice of reading late into the night--under the covers with a flashlight.

Perhaps because so many of the respondents were obtained through libraries, it could be expected that they would remember being taken to the library at an early age by their parents or being encouraged to go later on their own. The summer reading programs at the libraries are among the most frequently mentioned reading memories. These readers feel at home in the library as adults and remember having been assisted by librarians to find books which suited their interests, being rewarded and recognized for reading many books, and even being tutored in reading skills by especially concerned librarians.

The Reader and the School

Those adults who describe the strongest family influences tend not to remember the beginnings of reading in school. They may or may not remember a teacher who read to them, they may or may not remember a particular teacher with great fondness. In exploring situations that adults of varying ages and cultures identified as nonconducive to a lifelong enjoyment of reading, many remembered their fear or dislike of oral reading in elementary school. They remember having to read aloud and the pain of mistakes they made while doing so. One remembers being scolded for not being ready when called on: she had been reading ahead on the blue page thinking that would be hers to read aloud, but the substitute teacher that day didn't go in turns and called on her earlier than she anticipated, so when she read the blue page everyone knew that she wasn't paying attention. Another still blushes when she reads the word *run*. She was reading Dick and Jane aloud, very well she thought, until she turned the page and read, "See Spot *nun*." She instantly corrected herself, but was so embarrassed over the mistake that she remembers it some 40 years later. Reading aloud in class is a memory from later elementary and junior high days, also. Very few remembered having enjoyed reading aloud to the class and they suffered through hearing less able readers. With obvious sympathy, one man who now works with emotionally

handicapped students sadly recalls teachers stopping the poor reader to shout, "No, no, that's not right. Now stop and think and read it right!"

Almost everyone has memories of making oral and written book reports from elementary school days on. They usually had not enjoyed making the oral presentations. Some remember the oral book report as a challenge to be met: A math teacher had a teacher who made notes and graded the students on the grammatical correctness in their speech, and when she finally gave a report in which her teacher could find no errors, she was overjoyed. Most of the respondents do not remember book reports as any great problem because they were always reading anyway, and they could easily write about what they had read.

A few of the readers recall that their first experiences of critical thinking were associated with their early reading of fiction. A young real estate broker remembers her mother listening to her and talking with her about her books when she was very small. A biology professor recalls her mother having taken time to listen to her and to discuss sociological and behavioral patterns with her even before she went to school. She was not a happy child in first and second grades. Her teacher labeled her as odd or sick until a third grade teacher decided that she was different but had something to offer and suggested a rather difficult book for her to read. A professor of sociology remembers:

> "Our class was read a fairy tale, *Snow White and Rose Red,* in which the heroine interacted with some bears. The teacher asked, 'What is unusual about this story? How does this story differ from what you actually know about real life?' The answer seemed so obvious: Bears don't talk; animals don't talk. At least they don't talk to humans; humans talk to humans. To me it was the most obvious thing, but she had to wade through five or six students' answers before getting to me. 'Bears don't talk, teacher!' 'Yes class,' she said, 'bears don't talk.' It was the beginning of recognition on my part that the education system would value critical thinking and also that there was a distinction between fiction and reality."

Respondents often recall reading, memorizing, and reciting poetry. It seems that those who recall poetry in early grades and in junior high days, remember it with pleasure, but those who never mention poetry or mention it only as a high school or college content tend to dislike and see little "use" for it; however some of them say they wish they had had more earlier.

Often a respondent describes the nature of the school and/or classes attended. But it seems that when there is a strong family bond and strong family influences, the influence of the school is relatively unimportant. Most of these people did well enough in elementary school and have few complaints about those early years. Many describe in detail things that they particularly enjoyed. Nevertheless one does not feel that this was the prime influence in shaping the adult they became.

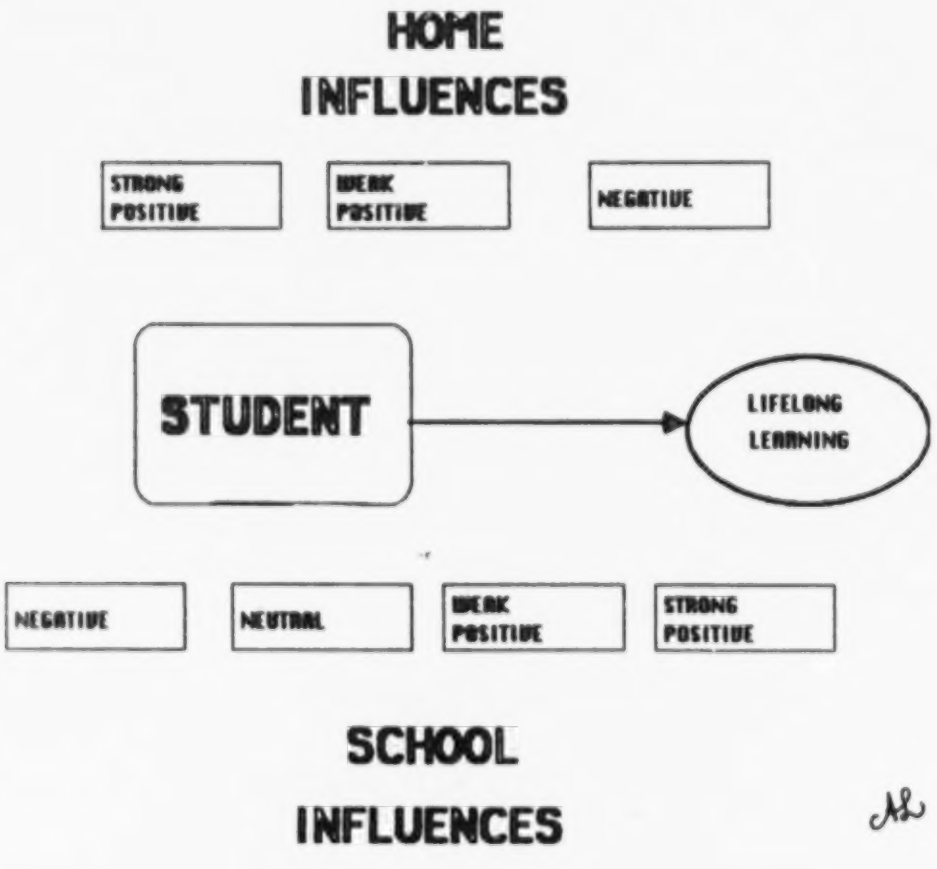
Those adults who are admitted non-readers almost always describe families that did things other than reading. If they shared with parents it was usually something physical such as chores or sports. There was never "time" to read as they were growing up and there still is not as an adult. Many feel rather guilty about this. Some admit that they feel that they don't read very well. These adults also describe dull, uninteresting, unchallenging school situations. They tend not to remember much good about school but a great deal about lack of success. They didn't care, their parents didn't care and they felt that the teachers didn't care. School was something to be endured so that you could go out to recess.

One exeption to every generalization stands out -- the one or two room country school. Every person who attended one comes up with this information spontaneously. They describe in detail the closeness and the experiences which seem so important to them. Perhaps it is because this school was in many ways an extension of the family. Many of the pupils were related and the teacher remained the same for several years. But very often things fell apart when they reached the "big" high school.

But there are adults who describe very limited experiences with their family and yet admit to being voracious readers. These people invariably tell about a teacher who "got them to read." Usually they can describe what the teacher read to them, what the teacher said to them, who else was there in the

class. It seems that when family influences toward literacy are not strong, the school has a chance to make a big difference.

We often hear teachers decry the fact that they cannot override the strong influence of the family and they cannot overcome familial or parental neglect. If people's memories are to be believed and relied upon, then somewhat the opposite is the case. When the family exerts a strong literacy influence, the school can do little to interfere. When the family does not have this influence, then the school is the shaper of the adult literary interest or noninterest. Unfortunately as many teachers turn young people off to reading as challenge them to become lifelong learners.



Making the Connection

On considering what lifelong readers are telling us about early influences, one is immediately struck by the influence of the family. It seems that when the family has a strong positive influence for developing literacy, the school has relatively little effect on the attitudes or even memories of the students. Even strong negative school experiences are overcome or compensated for with the school being neutral in influence although positive in providing learning experiences. Students from homes where the influence is positive but not a strongly controlling factor are influenced far more by other agencies. Since the school does not get automatic support from these students, a few negative, highly restrictive experiences can turn students against books and formal learning for the rest of their lives. When the home is having a negative impact on the student, either permanently or temporarily, the school probably has the greatest opportunity to influence attitudes. But the attitude will likely be either strongly negative or strongly positive depending on the learning environment created.

Acknowledging the nature of the learner in the middle years, one must then provide strategies that tie transescence developmental needs and family influences to the freedom of choice of the adult lifelong reader. These are the years when a young person adjusts the values of the home into a system to guide his emergence into self-direction. He needs a chance to try his wings, make mistakes, suffer the consequences, and then try again. Both the school and the home should provide opportunities to take on responsibility in small doses. But these young people have not reached the emotional independence which characterizes older adolescents, they need a wide range of models that will let them complete their developmental tasks.

Given the home influence pattern, strategies to strengthen positive goals are being suggested. One is a set of strategies which the reading specialist can initiate in conjunction with administration and classroom teacher. These, along with the teaching strategies, have been grouped according to the type of home influence. Hopefully this will provide a framework for looking at which students and which parents will be most receptive to which strategies.

Parents with family structures that have a strong positive influence toward reading tend to be appreciative and supportive of book lists, rating

systems, and thoughtful suggestions--then they do the rest. It may be possible to have these parents spread their influence so strategies in thi category are aimed at out of school time. Since we would like students f om weakly positive homes to develop strongly positive attitudes, the strategies here become more expansive and directive. We help the students grow intellectually while bolstering all positve influences. Here we enlist the help of all the content area teachers--suggesting new twists and making sure to weigh the important influences of the students environment--TV, sports, friends, peer groups

The students from the negative environment needs support-not opposition. Their world is falling apart -- or never got together in the first place. The beginning of adolescence is doubly difficult but they will never admit it . Offer books--a place to read them--an adult model. Especially important to this student is escape from tensions already encountered.

Helping the Reader find the Road

Category One -- impetus for lifelong reading is already set -- parents need our support

1. Sending home reading lists with choices
2. Providing book orders and book fairs with an evaluation or recommendation of some of the better selections
3. Inviting parents to school to observe the teacher (but not necessarily their child's class)
4. Encouraging parental support groups and read-ins for parents and teachers to sample books
5. Evidencing strong support and interest in the public library
6. Starting author study groups in the evening in the local library
7. Supporting book reviews and author luncheons on Saturday
8. Getting students to write books and "publish" them

Category Two -- There is support for reading but the model is weak -- parents care about achievement but don't provide strong reinforcement

1. Subscribing to a newspaper or newsmagazine, have in class
2. Accepting all reading as having a place even True Romance, Sports Afield or Hot Rod
3. Allowing choices in reading assignments
4. Having students conduct surveys to find out adult tastes in reading
5. Using social studies and science as a reason for promoting reading.
6. Continuing to read aloud as a model
7. Sharing your own current reading even though it is beyond teen tastes
8. Encouraging oral and dramatic interpretation of favorite reading
9. Making the reading/writing connection including class newsletters
10. Keeping in constant contact with the home to praise achievement
11. Providing a time and place for reading to happen without interuption

Category Three -- There is no support for reading or learning now or in the future -- Home is a negative influence because of emotional trauma or feeling that people should not waste time reading.

1. Reading aloud for pleasure and profit -- allowing students to share
2. Making books available. Create times at school to read
3. Memorizing poetry from choice and for a purpose
4. Creating after school reading hours or open libraries where lonely kids can "stick around" -- an alternative to tutoring
5. Sharing your own reading including magazines and newspapers
6. Guiding gently -- having standards but none too high
7. Providing information about fiction books that deal with problems
8. Doing a big unit on mythology so that students will understand literay allusions. -- don't neglect Germanic myths for that is what many cartoons and fantasies are based on.
9. Drawing constant parallels between TV and Reading so that you use what they do have available -- anlalyze plot structure of Sit-Coms etc.